El hombre se llamaba Tede (His Name Was Tede)

by Rebecca Gordon

Recently *Gente*, a weekly Nicaraguan literary magazine, carried a short story about a gay man. The story was called "El hombre se llamaba Tede" (his name was Tede), its main character a fictional Nicaraguan. His name was Tede, as in Tede Matthews, the gay writer, activist and organizer who died Saturday, July 17, here in San Francisco, of AIDS.

How did Tede's name find its way into print in that Central American country, where a few years ago no one even mentioned the existence of gay or lesbian people, let alone published stories about us in mainstream magazines? No doubt the author met Tede Matthews during one of his many trips to Nicaragua. Probably he remembered Tede in the same way many of us do here: as a gay man who was never ashamed to talk about it, no matter what the context, even as other U.S. leftists cringed and wished for a little more cultural sensitivity. We may have had cultural sensitivity, but Tede had guts.

Tede had the kind of guts that let him stand up to the police and mafia in the bad old bar days in Boston. The kind of guts it takes to convince the FBI—when they're looking for you because you're dodging the draft and they find you in bed with your lover—that they just missed the guy they're after by half an hour. The kind of guts that let you tuck away your dick, put on a pair of tits, and work the streets as a woman. Tede had the kind of guts that make you think maybe you could learn to be that brave yourself.

Tede started things and stirred things up. Newly arrived in San Francisco, he led a boycott of a Castro bar whose dress code (no open-toed shoes, no high heels and no floppy knit hats) was used to keep out women, drag queens and Black men. With 35 others, he risked a couple of years in jail by sitting in at the State Building demanding the governor give clemency to Inez Garcia (who had shot her rapist). He led a troupe of drag queen actors in guerrilla theater, performing at demonstrations against the war in Vietnam and against Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet.

Tede helped found Bay Area Gay Liberation (BAGL) in the '70s, Lesbians and Gays Against Intervention (LAGAI) in the '80s and worked with the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission (IGLHRC) in the '90s. The man never let up. He insisted—even face to face with Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega himself—that the revolutionary government must embrace its lesbian and gay citizens. And he insisted that lesbians and gays in this country do something to stop the wars our government wages against the poor who rise up anywhere in the world.

Tede had connections all over the world, and he always wanted you to do something about them. He was in your face or on your answering machine all the time: There's this gay Mexican playwright who's got AIDS; we're doing a benefit. You have to come. They're killing gays in Colombia; we're doing a letter writing campaign. You have to write something. We're raising money for Rebecca, or Jan, or Tony; she's going to Nicaragua or El Salvador or South Africa or Cuba. The party's on Saturday. You have to come. Tede didn't care how tired or burned out you were; you wrote, you went.

Of course Tede had connections here as well, including his lover and life partner Chuck Barragan, with whom he lived for more than nine years. A wide circle of friends who might never have known each other met through Tede: writers and artists from all over the United States and Latin America, activists and propagandists. He made a great effort to include people who were often swept aside—the shy, the inarticulate, the disenfranchised and apathetic.

Many people remember Tede as the long-haired hippie in the skirt who appeared in *Word Is Out*, a gay liberation film of the '70s. Tede lived in drag for several years. He worked as a prostitute and he understood something about how little respect and value the world accords women. Maybe that is why he had so many lesbian friends, including separatists. A lot of lesbians counted Tede as their only male friend. There was a time when drag queens were anathema to many feminists, representing as we believed the perfect symbol of men's contempt for women. Tede challenged us to recognize our commonality with these men who bent the bars of the gender cage, at the same time he challenged the other queens to learn to be with women.

Tede as one of the 1981 Parade Committee members (l-r): Bill Walker, Barbara Cameron, Tede, Glenn McIlhenny. Photo by Rink

For Tede, being queer was never about making the cover of *Newsweek* and pushing politely at the limits of tolerance. He understood the challenge queer people present to the whole shoddy, hateful construction of gender. In the '70s, he helped found *Fag Rag*, a magazine devoted to reclaiming and building a literature on the sleazy, sexy parts of being queer—the cocksucking and asslicking and gender bending that made being gay more than a lavender imitation of heterosexuality. How sad it is today that our so-called gay leaders have decided the most important challenge we can present to the people who run this country is the demand to kill and die for United States business interests, just like everyone else.

Tede was a gossip queen, always eager to hear or pass on the latest bit of dish in English, or *chisme en espanol*, whether about small press publishing in the U.S. or the lesbian community in Managua. Telephone, teletype, tell-a-queen, he used to say. This wasn't malice or mischief-making, although he wasn't above mixing a bit of dirt with the dish on occasion. But Tede loved gossip for the same reason that he loved politics, for the same reason he wrote and did theater and organized: because he was passionate about and fascinated by people's lives.

Many people, especially new arrivals from Latin America, describe Tede as the first person they met in San Francisco. Often these meetings took place at Modern Times Bookstore on Valencia Street, where Tede worked from the mid-'70s, first as a volunteer and later as a collective member. He built a spectacular collection of Spanish language books, traveling to book fairs in Mexico and Managua to increase the stock. This collection is a resource today, not only for Latin Americans and North Americans who've traveled south, but for the Spanish-speaking people of the Mission District.

Tede had a genius for connecting people who thought they had nothing in common, often by sheer force of will. He insisted the white gay community pay attention to a world outside the United States and to the realities of people of color here, and he helped organize groups and coalitions to make it happen. He expected the straight left, in this country and others, to embrace lesbian and gay liberation as an essential goal, not as an afterthought.

One night a few years ago, a strange mix of people, queers and straight leftists, feminists and solidarity activists, attended Volcanto, a cultural event Tede had organized to celebrate July 19, the anniversary of the Nicaraguan revolution. Two Nicaraguans—one lesbian and one gay man—spoke about their Nicaraguan lives and their hope that people like us might bring the U.S. war against their country to an end. There was singing and poetry. Somehow Tede had persuaded a resolutely apolitical group of Nicaraguan drag queens from the India Bonita bar to contribute their drag show to a celebration of a revolution

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At the end of the evening the lights came up, and the Nicaraguan lesbian who had spoken earlier looked into the face of the old man. Suddenly we watched them fly across the stage and into each others' arms. He had driven her school bus when she was a little girl in Nicaragua. Tede had drawn these unlikely people together, to an unlikely place, where it became more than all right, it became a glorious thing to be a lesbian or a drag queen or a revolutionary—or to love one.

Many people knew Tede through his writing. When he died, he was working on a collection of poems and two novels. Some of us will remember him best, though, as an organizer. Because what is an organizer, after all, but a person who unveils to disenfranchised individual human beings the tremendous power that lies at our unexpected points of connection? Tede himself was such a point, a hub in the turning wheel, and we will miss him very badly.

A celebration of Tede's life will be held Sunday, Aug. 22, at Modern Times Bookstore, 888 Valencia St. at 7 pm. On Saturday, Sept. 11 at the SF Women's Building, a benefit "Sisters for a Brother" will be held with writers including June Jordan, Dorothy Allison and Cherrie Moraga. Proceeds from this benefit will be donated to a Tede Matthews Fund to continue some of the political work Tede began. ✿

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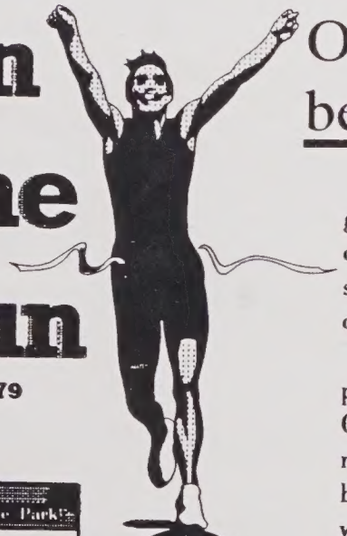

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- **Lesbian Support Group: "Lesbian in the Year of the Queer"** Weekly, starting Tuesday, August 17, 8-10 pm.

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IN
PEACE

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Death Dance Delayed

On the brink
of a great-tooth cave
is a terrifying
place to be
with its dancing calaveras

The winds howling past
carry scents
of my life's passion fears
together with the sweat of my labors
the salt of my lips
traveling this geography

My mother's apple pie
steaming fresh on the formica table
the tears of a sissy boy
and other forbidden odors that come with growth

The fire roaring from the cave's mouth
I knew was the final consumate kiss
no more poems
no more love and its making
no more

My anchor my beloved
stood by my side
with his litany
of why he hates the fire
my morbid attraction
to its finality
to the separation
it symbolizes

The clutch of his love
pulled me from the cave's teeth
nurtured me
under an ancient oak
held me in his strong embrace

In that stillness
I gazed at the crest of the hill
a silhouette of silent witnessess
stood in relief against the sunrise
those other hands
that helped defy the torch of death

With tears of gratitude
I bathe the oak
reclining in his embrace
humbled by the guardians
whose fearless love
freed me from the grip
of a hellish night

July 5th 1993 **—Tede Matthews**

Celebration of the Life of Tede Matthews
(July 29th, 1951-July 17th, 1993)

Modern Times Bookstore
Sunday, August 22nd, 1993

program

Welcome and Proclamation from the City of San Francisco — **Kim Marshall, MC**

Songs — **Blackberri**
"Eat the Rich," "Love You Are My Everything" by Blackberri

Remembering — **Jesse Cox**

The Amazing Life of A Common Man — **Sara Levi Calderón**

Tahui/ Invocation to the Four Directions — **Francisco X. Alarcón**

Words — **Ruth Mahaney**

Kobayashi Maru — **Chuck Barragan**

Songs — **Judith Kate Friedman**
"They Are Falling All Around Me" by Bernice Johnson Reagon
"I Don't Ask Much" by Judith Kate Friedman

Open mike All are welcome to speak for a few minutes
facilitated by Kim Marshall (til 11 pm)

photographs of Tede

April '93 at the March on Washington (program) Brad Craft
At Modern Times (altar) & elsewhere Jean Weisinger

Join us as we celebrate the spirit of
Tede Matthews

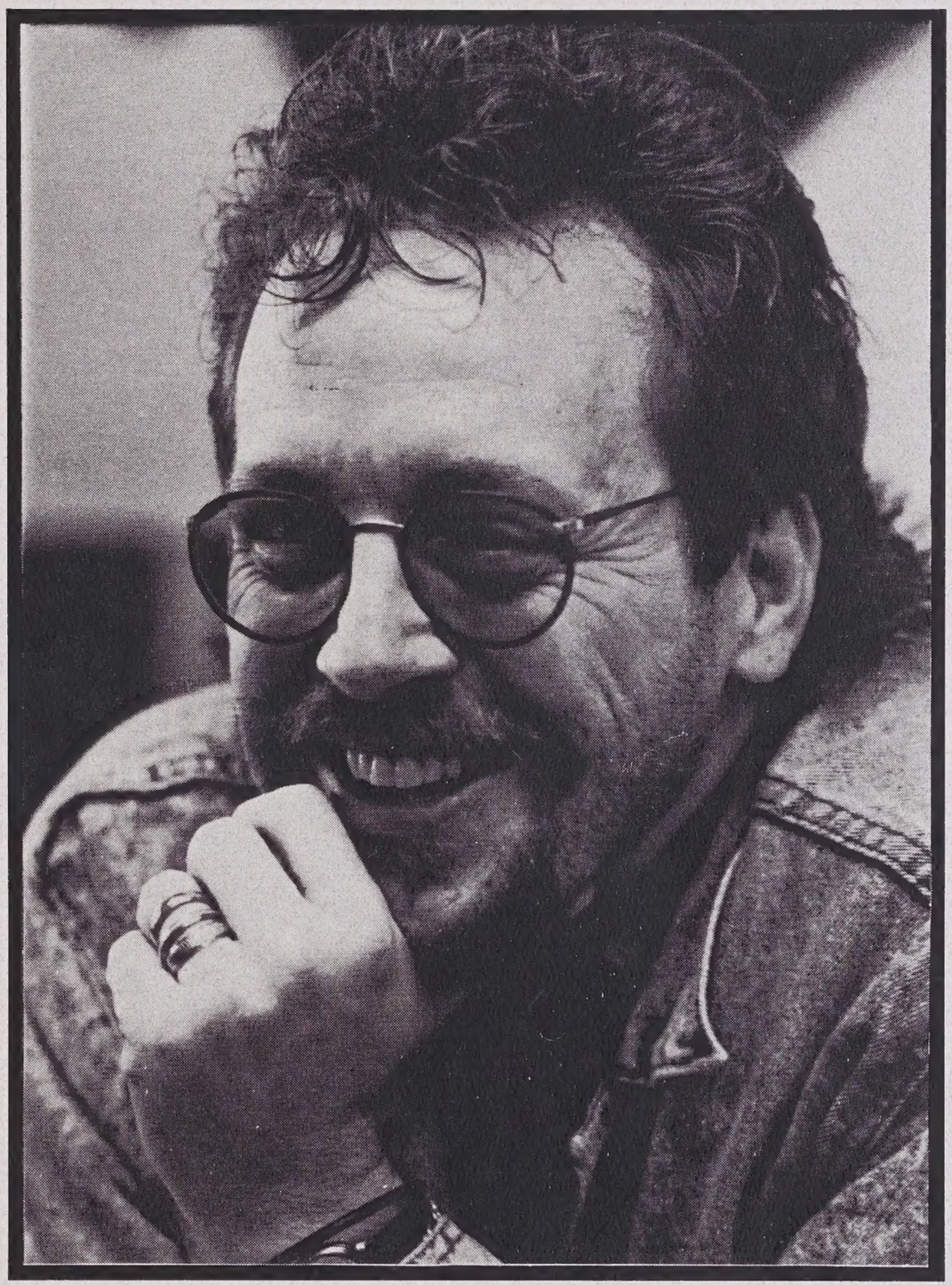

photo by Jean Weisinger

July 29th, 1951 --- July 17th, 1993

▽ Bring a white candle or white flowers for the altar ▽

Sunday August 22nd, 1993 7pm

Modern Times Bookstore
888 Valencia Street, San Francisco

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